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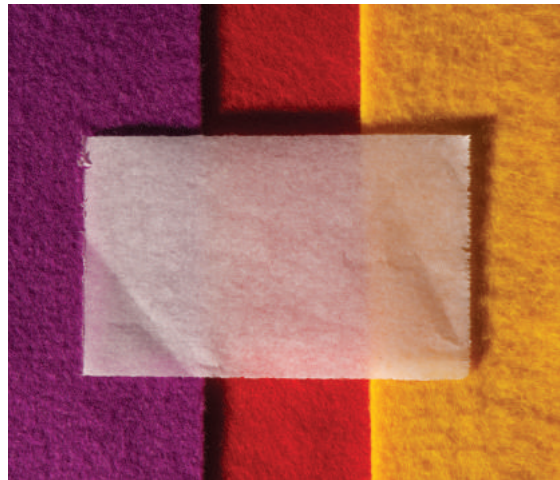
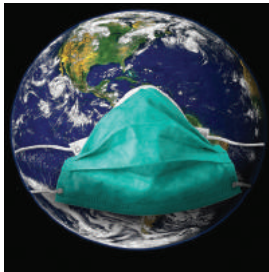
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RESEARCH REPORT: COVID-19 SERIES



Pandemic Pauses: Understanding Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19



Laura Wise, Sanja Badanjak,
Christine Bell and Fiona Knäussel



This research draws on the 'Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19' open access tool, which tracks ceasefires and related events such as ceasefire extensions and terminations, which have occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is available from: <https://pax.peaceagreements.org/static/covid19ceasefires/>

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Key Findings | 01 |
| Introduction | 03 |
| Part I: Tracking Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19 | 05 |
| Part II: Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19 and Prospects for Peace | 16 |
| Part III: Supporting Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19 - Issues and Recommendations | 24 |
| Conclusion | 30 |

Key Findings

- ▶ Since March 2020, conflict parties have declared 25 ceasefires, across 17 countries. Ceasefires have been declared by some conflict parties in Afghanistan, Angola, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines, Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Thailand, Ukraine and Yemen.
- ▶ After an initial period of ceasefires declared following the United Nations Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire in March 2020, conflict and peace processes are increasingly returning to 'normal', as any Covid-19 concerns become part of the totality of context, rather than a new external shock. The initial scarcity of information about the course of the pandemic and the nature of the virus is being replaced by actors' increased ability to take the pandemic into account.
- ▶ Most of the ceasefires declared since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared, have been unilateral declarations of ceasefire, in conflicts where buy-in from a wide range of actors would be necessary to tangibly reduce violence. Only 6 of the 25 ceasefires were multi-lateral or bi-lateral, and many ceasefire declarations were limited in terms of territorial and/or temporal scope. There has been a prevalence of tentative ceasefire declarations explicitly conditional on other conflict parties not using the Covid-19 crisis to advance military or political goals.
- ▶ Despite often being reported as 'humanitarian ceasefires' or 'Covid-19 ceasefires', only approximately half of the ceasefires declared since the start of the pandemic have included references to Covid-19 or acknowledgements of humanitarian need, and even fewer have contained clear mechanisms for supporting humanitarian actors in tackling the pandemic.

- ▶ The impact of Covid-19 on conflict and peace processes raises six key lessons learned for peacebuilders to take into consideration as the pandemic progresses:
 - Understanding the strategic objectives of armed actors is important to understanding the ceasefire's potential
 - Supporting ceasefires appropriately requires building accurate data
 - Diplomatic support for the UNSG's Call remains important
 - The potential and challenges of 'humanitarian' ceasefires for longer-term peace efforts should be better understood (and may be important to vaccination campaigns)
 - Monitoring conflict parties' conduct throughout the ceasefire process is vital to reduction in violence
 - Ceasefire design often creates real risks of gender exclusion.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Support local initiatives for localised ceasefires.
2. Support data collection on ceasefires during pandemics.
3. Value and build diplomatic and institutional support for the UNSG global ceasefire call, or similar future initiatives.
4. Build better understanding of the pathways forward to peace from targeted humanitarian ceasefires.
5. Support better monitoring of conflict parties' conduct.
6. Deal better with gender inclusion in ceasefires.

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization characterized the rapid global spread of the novel coronavirus known as Covid-19 as a pandemic.¹ Shortly after, on 23 March 2020, the UN Secretary General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres called for an immediate [global ceasefire](#), to help tackle the threat of Covid-19 rather than compound the risk to those in fragile and conflict-affected areas.² The UNSG implored conflict parties to immediately “silence the guns” in order to “to help create corridors for life-saving aid”, “to open precious windows for diplomacy”, and “to bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to COVID-19”.³

In response to this call, at least 171 states together with multiple international, regional, and local organisations, including major religious leaders, declared their support by June 2020.⁴ Since the onset of the pandemic, ceasefires have been declared or proposed by some conflict parties in Armenia and Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Angola, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines, Senegal, Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Thailand, Ukraine and Yemen, although as we discuss further below, not all of these can be clearly attributed to the UNSG call itself. Difficulties in agreeing a United Nations Security Council Resolution to support the initiative undercut the call, but eventually on 1 July 2020, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously approved Resolution 2532 in support of a 90-day global humanitarian pause to enable humanitarian assistance related to Covid-19.⁵

In this report, we draw on the ‘[Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19](#)’ tracker (here after CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker) to analyse how ceasefires have unfolded throughout the pandemic, and to consider how the pandemic has affected moves towards ceasefires and peace processes.⁶ In Part I, we provide data on what types of ceasefires conflict parties have declared since March 2020, and the extent to which these ceasefires have held. In Part II, we put forward key analytical and practical concerns for understanding these ceasefires and considering what, if anything, ceasefires during the pandemic mean for wider peace processes. In Part III, we conclude that, although the Covid-19 pandemic has not been a ‘game-changer’ for ceasefire and peace process trajectories, it is now a crucial part of the context in which peace processes must take place. We make recommendations for how ceasefires, and peacemaking more generally, can be better supported during global health emergencies.

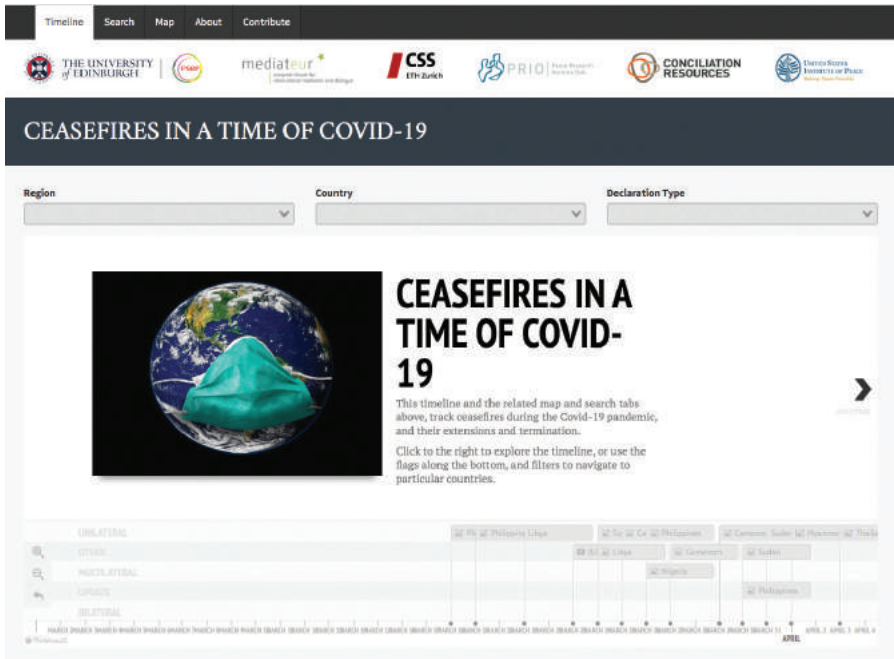


Figure 1: Front page of Tracker of Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19.

Available at: www.pax.peaceagreements.org/static/covid19ceasefires/

The 'Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19' tracker is an open access tool, which tracks ceasefires and related events, such as commitments to move towards a reduction in violence or clear ceasefire breakdowns, which have occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19 is a collaborative project between the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich, Conciliation Resources, MediateUR (European Forum for International Mediation and Dialogue) and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), with thanks to contributions from the Mediation Support Unit in the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.

Part I: Tracking Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19: What have we learnt?

The ceasefires declared since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic are varied in content and scope, as we outline below, and as can be seen in the 'CV- 19 Ceasefires Tracker').⁷ Given this challenge, and the UNSG's call for a global ceasefire, how have ceasefires unfolded?

Ceasefires – what are they? A few preliminary remarks on what comprises a ceasefire are necessary. There is no single legal definition of a ceasefire agreement, and the terms ceasefire, cessation of hostilities, truce, and armistice are often used interchangeably in agreement names. Often terminology has a political significance: for example, the conflict parties in Aceh could only agree to a '[Joint Understanding on a Brief Humanitarian Pause](#)' in 2000. Whatever its terminology, the aim of any ceasefire agreement is to permanently or temporarily suspend hostilities between conflict parties, based on a variety of underlying motivations.

We define ceasefire for the purposes of this report as 'declarations by parties engaged in conflict, unilaterally or by agreement with other parties, to cease hostilities (however phrased), from a particular moment, including where this commitment has some reservations (for example where it is in the form of a 'no-first-strike' commitment that reserves some capacity to retaliate if attacked).'

⁸

Patterns and Trends: We set out in Figure 2 the key numbers and trends relating to ceasefires during the Covid-19 pandemic to date (March 2020 – March 2021):

Figure 2: Key numbers and trends



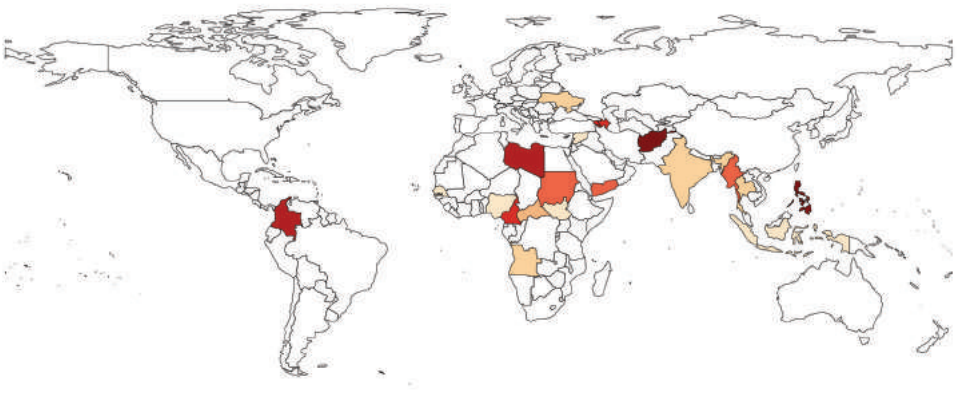
In total, we have recorded 76 various ceasefires, statements, and related events in conflict-affected countries, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not all of these events constitute a ceasefire: for example, related events include the UNSG's call for a global ceasefire itself, and UNSC Resolution 2532, as they are vital for understanding the context in which ceasefire efforts are taking place. Additionally, there were several cases of armed actors responding to a call with promises or commitments to limit their violence in certain circumstances, but not explicitly declaring or agreeing a new ceasefire. For instance, in the [Central African Republic](#), the parties recommitted to an existing ceasefire, which we classified as a 'related event' but not a ceasefire. In [Senegal](#), for example, the Movement of Democratic Forces in Casamance called on its combatants to refrain from initiating attacks, and to facilitate any Covid-19-related humanitarian efforts but expressed no clear commitment to nor an offer of a ceasefire.

Of the 76 recorded events, 63 were clearly ceasefire-related, which includes unilateral declarations, bilateral and multilateral agreements, but also includes subsequent extensions of ceasefires called, and instances of ceasefires taking effect after a declaration. It is worth noting that reciprocal unilateral ceasefires may in-effect result in a de facto multilateral ceasefire, because one side declares a ceasefire in a unilateral step, an opposing side reciprocates, and both subsequently extend the ceasefire. Some countries also saw multiple ceasefires for different reasons. Sometimes ceasefires lapsed, and new ones were put in place ([Afghanistan](#)), or ceasefire events took place in more than one sub-national conflict ([India](#)), indicating that a consideration of sub-national ceasefires is important for a thorough understanding of the past year's ceasefires, as different conflicts, locations, and armed actors may characterise the ceasefires within one country.

While it would be useful to be able to measure whether the overall 'rate' of ceasefires was affected by the UNSG call, this is difficult to measure in a categorical way. There is currently no publicly available resource that we can rely on for clear comparison of ceasefire trends up to 2020. While the [PA-X Peace Agreements Database and Dataset](#) provides information on all formally agreed ceasefires between 1990 and 2020, it does not cover the entire spectrum of ceasefire arrangements, some of which, as mentioned above, are informal, made via announcements to the media, often in the form of unilateral "no-first-strike declarations." The more expansive definition of ceasefires which we have used to understand the Covid-19 period precludes numerical comparison with PA-X data, and we are not able to say whether 2020 produced more or fewer ceasefire arrangements than previous years. As of March 2021, there is currently no data resource available that tracks these varied ceasefire arrangements, over a longer period of time, and with global coverage.⁹ However, the CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker does allow us to consider the events of 2020, the content and impact of ceasefire arrangements made since the start of the pandemic, and the unfolding of individual processes over this past year.

With this definition and measurement issues in mind, the CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker indicates the following insights into peacemaking in a pandemic:

Global reach. Since March 2020, conflict parties have declared 25 ceasefires across 17 countries. Ceasefires have been declared by some conflict parties in Afghanistan, Angola, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines, Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Thailand, Ukraine and Yemen. All of these ceasefires, alongside countries in which there have been commitments to move towards a reduction in violence and related events, are shown in the map in Figure 3.



related activity was recorded over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes ceasefires and related events, as discussed above.

Even a quick glance at the map shows that the locations of these ceasefires and related events over the course of the pandemic came from longest and most intractable conflict areas, many of which have also had a history of ongoing peace negotiations. Areas with the most activity, such as Colombia, Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan, and the Philippines have also seen a high level of agreements in the past, jointly making up almost a quarter of all agreements, ceasefires and others, signed between 1990 and 2020.¹⁰

Prevalence of unilateral ceasefires or 'no first strike' declarations. Most of the ceasefires declared since Covid-19 have been unilateral declarations of ceasefire, in conflicts where buy-in from a wide range of actors would be necessary to tangibly reduce violence. Several of these ceasefires are explicitly conditional on the government not using the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to make military or other gains, and state that they maintain the right to use force in self-defence.¹¹ They are, in a sense, 'no first strike' declarations. For instance, in their declaration to cease all activities in order to facilitate humanitarian access during Covid-19, the National Revolutionary Front (BRN) in [Thailand](#) explicitly stated that the pause was in force "for as long as BRN is not attacked by Thai Government personnel."¹² The National Liberation Army (ELN) in [Colombia](#) described their one-month unilateral ceasefire in response to Covid-19, declared on 29 March 2020, as "an Active Ceasefire, because we reserve the right to defend ourselves against attacks by State forces consisting of regular troops, paramilitaries and drug trafficking gangs in various parts of the country."¹³

Few bilateral and multi-lateral ceasefires. Since March 2020, conflict parties have reached six bilateral or multilateral ceasefires: between multiple community groups in Benue state, [Nigeria](#); between the internationally recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council in [Yemen](#); between the [Libyan](#) Army of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and Libyan National Army (LNA); between [Armenia and Azerbaijan](#) in the Nagorno-Karabakh area, on two occasions; and between the Trilateral Contact Group and representatives of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in [Ukraine](#). Interestingly, in some cases, such as in the [Philippines](#), both the government and a non-state actor (the Communist People's Party (CPP)/National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP)/New People's Army (NPA)) made what were technically 'unilateral' ceasefire commitments, in a sequence that suggests mutual response and even agreement creating a de facto bilateral ceasefire (although after 26 days of ceasefire the NPA resumed military operations).¹⁴

Ambiguous moves to ceasefire. In other conflict-affected countries, parties merely welcomed the ceasefire call, or purported to institute some form of ceasefire with complex results. In [Yemen](#), for example, the Houthis and the Yemeni government initially responded by welcoming the call. Later, the Saudi-led coalition (Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen) announced a two-week ceasefire which was received with optimism internationally, but was quickly rejected by the Houthis, who declared that it was not in fact a ceasefire and announced their intention to continue to fight, while also publishing a 'comprehensive vision to end aggression'.¹⁵ Reports of conflict on the ground indicate that violence is ongoing, and that the calls and declarations of ceasefires are being used in a strategically instrumental way, in a conflict that continues.¹⁶ Above, we mentioned the case of [Senegal](#), where a similarly tentative suggestion to troops to refrain from attack was issued by the Movement of Democratic Forces in the Casamance, with no ceasefire emerging.

Varied humanitarian content. Unsurprisingly, many of the ceasefires agreed in the months immediately following the UNSG global call acknowledge the threat of Covid-19 to various degrees, and many state the need to facilitate the work and movement of the healthcare and humanitarian sectors. Of the 25 ceasefires recorded since March 2020, around half contained content that specifically referenced Covid-19. For instance, in [Syria](#), the unilateral ceasefire declaration by General Command of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) pointed out that further fighting would adversely affect the already weakened healthcare infrastructure in the country. Similarly, in the [Philippines](#), the ceasefire announced by the Communist Party of the Philippines specifically referenced the need for urgent support for those affected by the coronavirus itself and those dealing with the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic.

Replication of pre-Covid-19 ceasefire patterns. Unlike declarations that can be read as direct responses to the pandemic and the UNSG call, some of ceasefires recorded are extensions of pre-existing ceasefires or cessation of hostility agreements that were due to expire in late March and early April, rather than initiatives that were clearly linked to either Covid-19 or the UNSG's call. For example, the unilateral extension of a pre-pandemic ceasefire announced by the [Sudan](#) People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N El Hilu) in Blue Nile and South Kordofan built on an existing but expiring ceasefire. Others were similarly the result of processes that were already underway: the inter-communal ceasefire in Benue state had a clear pre-pandemic negotiating history with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's ongoing work across [Nigeria](#), even though the ceasefire terms specifically mentioned Covid-19.¹⁷

In [Afghanistan](#), a ceasefire was called during the pandemic for the duration of Eid. However, Eid ceasefires have been declared in previous years; for example a previous instance took place in 2018.¹⁸ In [Ukraine](#), a multilateral ceasefire brokered in July neither mentioned Covid-19 as a motivating factor in the emergence of the agreement nor did it list the containment of the virus as a goal of the ceasefire. The agreement results from ongoing mediation efforts by the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Trilateral Contact Group and is part of a series of similar ceasefire arrangements reached in Ukraine before the pandemic.¹⁹

All of these examples suggest that the pandemic has not dramatically altered the outlook for many conflict and negotiation processes. In all of the above cases, the existing situation was already conducive to some ceasefire-oriented negotiations, pandemic and the UNSG's call notwithstanding, and it is impossible to tell if it added anything to the incentives.

Time-limited. Not all ceasefires declared during Covid-19 specify a time limit: of those that do, the usual time period is 14 to 30 days. However, some of the ceasefires have been extended, either explicitly or through a reframing of commitments. For example, ELN's one-month ceasefire in [Colombia](#) was set to expire on 30 April, The National Liberation Army (ELN) explicitly stated that they would not renew it, but in fact still followed it with a 'no strike' commitment even though not framed as a ceasefire. Given that the original ceasefire had a 'no first strike' definition, this second 'non-ceasefire' was in fact very similar in substance to the ceasefire it replaced. An extension of a unilateral ceasefire by the [Sudan](#) People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N El Hilu faction), which did not specifically refer to Covid-19, but was announced on 1 May 2020, is set to last until 31 January 2021. Similarly, in May 2020 the [Myanmar](#) military, the Tatmadaw, declared a four month ceasefire in the conflict with ethnic armed organisations, with the aim to better contain Covid-19 and to restore peace. However, after news coverage of the initial declarations, it is difficult to find verifiable information on violations, breakdowns, and extensions, including for those where the time limit has already passed. This highlights the reality that ceasefire announcements may have cost groups very little, bringing strategic reputational benefits for the armed actors involved, and little publicity or cost in terms of monitoring and accountability for ceasefire violations. This possibility is lent some weight by examination of the content of the ceasefires declared, which show very few examples of detailed mechanisms for supporting the humanitarian and pandemic-fighting efforts.

Geographical scope. Despite calls and efforts to reach nationwide Covid-19 ceasefires in places such as Syria, the majority of the ceasefires during the pandemic have been reached in sub-state disputes, and accordingly are limited in territorial scope. The only instances of nationwide ceasefires are in Yemen, South Sudan, Sudan, the Philippines, and Afghanistan, as we have already touched on. In [Yemen](#), the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen announced a nationwide ceasefire for two weeks (with the limitations described above). In [South Sudan](#), the South Sudan Opposition Movements Alliance (SSOMA) have unilaterally recommitted to the nationwide COHA from 2017, which was last renewed in January 2020.²⁰ In [Sudan](#), the government recommitted to a nation-wide ceasefire. In the Philippines, the government and the Communist Party of the Philippines both committed to a ceasefire. In [Afghanistan](#), the Taliban declared several three-day ceasefires for the periods of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha that were reciprocated by the government. While the conflict between [Armenia and Azerbaijan](#) over Nagorno-Karabakh is focused on a single region, both countries fully agreed to ceasefire, which we also classify as nationwide.

Other ceasefires have involved a sub-state conflict territory. For instance, there have been two announcements of ceasefires in India, one by the Communist Party of [India](#) and the other by National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Khaplang (NSCN-K). In each of these cases, the conflict arises in a sub-state region and while the ceasefire is therefore sub-state in scope, it covers the entire area of armed group activity. Other ceasefires have been declared by actors with control over a limited area, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast [Syria](#). Sub-state ceasefires give some sense that the UNSG's call has provided a visibility opportunity for smaller sub-state groups to attempt to gain legitimacy from domestic or external audiences. In the case of the Anglophone crisis in [Cameroon](#), some armed groups in the territory of Ambazonia issued statements and one clear ceasefire proclamation, while adding that they ask the UN to recognize the conflict in which they are engaging.²¹

Responses to the UNSG call from non-armed actors. Not all responses to the UNSG's call are straightforward agreements between armed groups or direct instructions to an armed group's forces to end offensive activities. In some cases, we have seen more tentative calls to take part in the ceasefire call, or endorsements of the call by civil society actors pushing conflict parties. Even prior to the UNSG's call, civil society groups and unions in [Colombia](#) appealed to armed groups to ceasefire in order to facilitate tackling the spread of Covid-19.²² In [Libya](#), the UNSG's call was supported by numerous professionals, journalists, local and national political actors, with no effect on the armed actors.²³ Following the limited extension of an initial unilateral Covid-19 ceasefire in the Ambazonia region, in June 2020 a campaign group comprised of former heads of state and Nobel Prize laureates challenged the [Cameroon](#) government and all other armed groups to declare a humanitarian ceasefire.²⁴ The UNSG's Call may therefore have been important for the basis it gives to local communities to push for peace with state and non-state combatants.

'Covid-19 Ceasefires' or 'Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19'? A key question is whether these are ceasefires which chanced to happen during the pandemic, or whether they were in some sense propelled by the pandemic and efforts to dampen conflict to deal with it. We suggest that the CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker captures both types of ceasefire since March 2020.

Firstly, parties have made limited responses to the UNSG's global call, often framed as humanitarian ceasefires to deal with Covid-19, which we can more confidently describe as 'Covid-19 ceasefires', whether the motivation to pause hostilities was truly for humanitarian purposes or not. Secondly, conflict parties have reached more traditional 'business as usual' ceasefires, in which Covid-19 and the UNSG call do not appear to be relevant. Rather than treating both these as 'Covid-19 ceasefires', we suggest that these are 'Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19': declared during a pandemic, with the pandemic featuring prominently in the conflict parties' considerations but not necessarily driving the parties to fully disengage.

Increasingly as the pandemic progresses, and parties become more adaptive to the 'new normal', as we discuss further in parts II and III, we are no longer seeing Covid-19 humanitarian ceasefires, nor responses to the UNSG's call. The distinction is important for research and analysis that has shown a distinction between ceasefires called for particular humanitarian purposes, and more general ceasefires that may accompany a move towards a peace process. While early Covid-19 ceasefires appear to have something in common with pre-Covid-19 ceasefires that reached for humanitarian and health purposes, as time moves on comparison to conventional ceasefires which unfold against the backdrop of external crisis may be more applicable to understanding how peacemaking happens in a pandemic. As the multiple varieties of the Covid-19 vaccine are now being developed, approved, and disseminated, lessons learned from historical humanitarian pauses that allowed for vaccination campaigns may become useful again. With that in mind, we now turn to the relationship of Covid-19 ceasefires to broader prospects for peace.

Part II: Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19 and Prospects for Peace

Where ceasefires have been influenced by pandemic-related factors, including the UNSG's call, what then does this mean for any wider peace processes? The Covid-19 pandemic has not been the game changer to peace processes that it was hoped it might be in March 2020, but there have been some interesting developments in how and when ceasefires are tied to the pandemic, and areas of innovation that are useful in considering more widely how peace processes can be supported during the pandemic. We have identified six sets of issues which are vital to understanding and supporting the ceasefires of the past year and those that are to come.

Understanding the Strategic Objectives of Armed Actors is Important to Understanding the Ceasefire's Potential.

Whilst the UNSG's global ceasefire call was widely reported as an opportunity for the pursuit of peace, conflict parties do not always agree to ceasefires with peace in mind.²⁵ The importance of strategic concerns of armed actors, particularly non-state groups, is reflected in Figure 4. There, it is clear that the initial period of the pandemic and post-UNSG's call has mostly seen activity from non-state actors. Such actors most often lack the resources and recognition that states have, and thus are more likely to see benefit in responding to the UNSG's call or by simply being seen as supporting humanitarian and public health efforts.

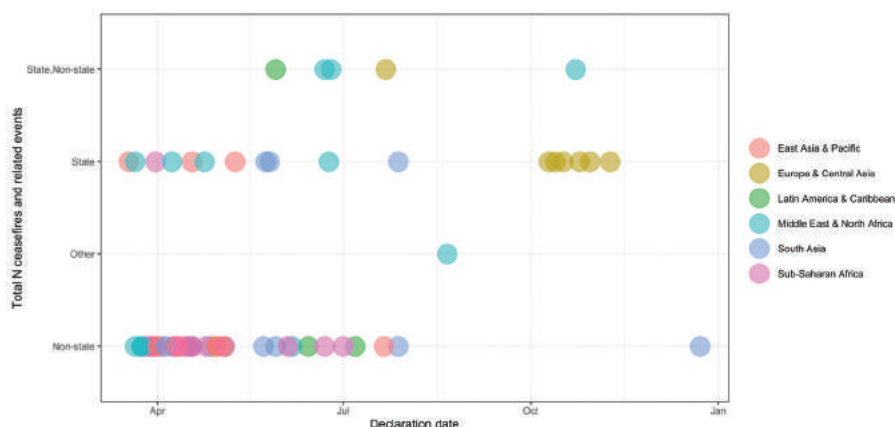


Figure 4: Ceasefire declarations, agreements, and related events, by main actor type. All actors were active initially but dropped off in the summer, with non-state actors overshadowing the activities of states.

There are multiple strategic concerns of armed actors that may motivate them to support or refuse participation in the UNSG’s global call for a Covid-19 ceasefire, which peacebuilders and researchers will need to be aware of and build into their response and analysis:²⁶

- ▶ The UNSG’s global ceasefire call is a high-profile initiative. Responding to it may signal to both global and domestic audiences that the armed group or its political wing is a legitimate actor, one that is embedded in global political institutions and gains or confirms legitimacy by virtue of external recognition.
- ▶ Similarly, a group may be trying to gain recognition from external actors by responding to the call, knowing that such a response may bring them to the attention of those that may include them in various types of discussions and negotiations. Some conflict parties may also respond to the call at the behest of their external allies, attempting to improve the image of both the conflict party and their external supporters.

- ▶ A response to the ceasefire call may be a 'fishing expedition', where the aim is not necessarily related to legitimacy, costs of the illness spreading, nor signalling, but rather relates to the need for gaining information about the other side, including to test and resolve their opponents capabilities.
- ▶ Calling for a ceasefire as a response to the global call may be a relatively easy way out for an armed actor that is already on the losing side, even if not yet defeated - in other words the call hit a 'ripe moment' for conflict resolution and provided a conducive context for parties to make a ceasefire move. There may be some groups or governments for which this call for ceasefire is a most welcome development, particularly if they are in areas not (yet) affected by Covid-19.
- ▶ The spread of the illness may affect armed actors in remote areas differently from those in urban areas. Being in a remote area means they are less likely to be affected in the first place – but once in contact with the illness, close quarters in which the armed groups may find themselves, high intragroup dependence, and lack of facilities may make the spread of the virus more of a threat.
- ▶ Similarly, the spread of the virus may affect state and non-state actors differently, both in who is affected by the disease and when in the pandemic trajectory, and in how it affects their capacity to engage in the conflict and their peacemaking incentives. For instance, depending on how it perceives the timeline of the pandemic, a government may want to pause military activities and focus funding on containing the virus and supporting healthcare. Alternatively, it may expect that the worst of the pandemic is yet to come, and decide to engage even more forcefully against the armed groups they are in conflict with, with the aim of striking a significant blow to avoid the groups gaining funds, material, and members while the government is focused on pandemic-related matters.
- ▶ Not all conflict actors are the same – the incentives for smaller actors are different from those that have wider membership and support. Additionally, size need not correlate with ability to control territory or population, as smaller and localized groups may be providing public goods locally. When this is the case, Covid-19 concerns may play a greater role in their considerations.

The impact of the pandemic would necessarily depend on both the nature of the armed actor and their context, resulting in a variety of outcomes, with small actors responding differently from larger, better established ones, and ongoing peace processes differing from those where there is little to no history of negotiation and mediation.

Supporting Ceasefires Appropriately Requires Building Accurate Data

The CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker data indicates the importance of accurate data to understanding the relationship of ceasefires to conflict and peace process dynamics. Sometimes there can be a rush in reporting to declare ceasefires as having been 'agreed', whilst in fact media statements from parties have been made to build the groundwork, without formally committing themselves to a ceasefire, and certainly without having reached mutual agreement. This happened in Afghanistan in April 2020, where a statement regarding the Taliban's intention to cease fighting in areas under its control, should these areas see Covid-19 outbreaks, was widely reported as being a ceasefire declaration, which the Taliban then disputed and claimed that such an intention does not constitute an offer of ceasefire.²⁷ In [Cameroon](#), the Ambazonia Governing Council released a statement in which they supported the UNSG global call, but also proclaimed that they would not be declaring a ceasefire for fear of government using the crisis to attack.²⁸

This confusion or misinterpretation is not unique to pandemic peace processes. However, the CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker demonstrates the messiness of conflict party declarations operating during the information fog of the pandemic. Increasingly, we are seeing the conflict and peace processes returning to 'normal', as any Covid-19 concerns become part of the totality of context, rather than a new external shock. The initial scarcity of information about the course of the pandemic and the nature of the virus is being replaced by an increased ability of armed actors to take the pandemic into account when considering the next move, be it in armed battles or in negotiations.

It is also important to realise that non-state and state use of force is differently managed, and that tracking moves from violence requires more than just ceasefires to be monitored. For instance, conflict and states of emergency are often linked, and form part of the picture of whether violence is increasing or being halted. While non-state actors use violence that is recognised as such, states with a monopoly on the use of force can often enable forms of violence or repression through emergency legislation. States of emergency can be justified as part of pandemic containment, but can also be called in the name of the pandemic for purposes of curtailing civic freedom.²⁹

A state of emergency that is proclaimed in a time of pandemic may serve a dual purpose for a government: on the one hand, it may be a way of more easily manoeuvring resources to deal with the pandemic, but it may also facilitate control over the population and particularly to more easily survey the activities of any armed groups. Regardless of whether the motives are truly pandemic-related, it is important to consider the potential for states of emergency or similarly drastic decisions on the part of governments to drive conflict. The effect of the pandemic in some settings may be to support pauses in hostilities – but the pandemic also creates volatile situations in which conflict may arise. Consider, for instance, the Ethiopian case, where the decision to postpone elections, while praised as prudent by some,³⁰ seems to have played a role in accelerating the Tigray conflict.

Diplomatic Support for the UNSG's Call is Important

The endorsement of world leaders and religious figures has been important to sustaining the momentum and public awareness of the UNSG's call for a global ceasefire. The [UNSC resolution 2532](#) of 1 July 2020 in support of a 90-day global humanitarian pause to enable humanitarian assistance related to Covid-19, despite having come later than is ideal, did initially reinject momentum.³¹ Nevertheless, as the Covid-19 crisis continued into the summer, the Covid-19-related ceasefires largely failed to support more extensive peace negotiation, or even further ceasefire declarations (as can be seen in Figure 5), and the momentum and public attention may be lost.³² With uncertainty regarding the future spread and costs of the virus, but also the potential need for vaccination campaigns, the attention of both local and international actors ought to focus on regaining the lost momentum. Ceasefires and humanitarian agreements are likely to be vital to ensuring that vaccines are available, that the conflict actors do not spoil vaccination efforts, and that the attempt to create or extend humanitarian pauses in fighting are used to explore the potential for building trust among the warring sides, however fragile and fraught such attempts may be.

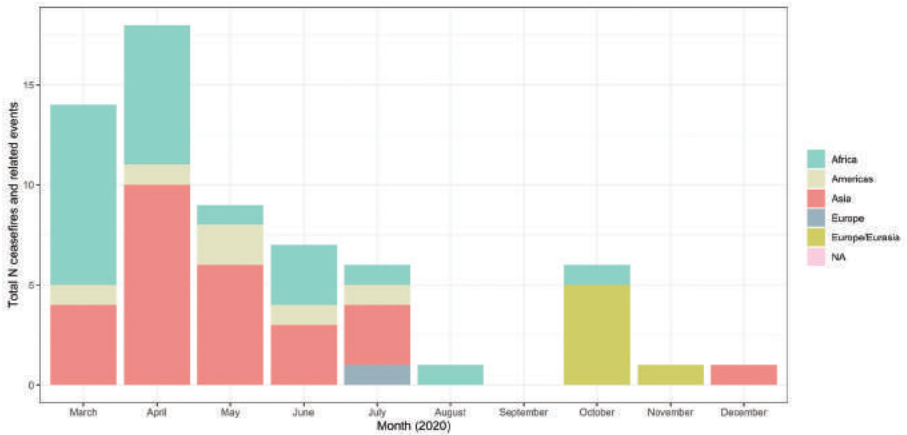


Figure 5: Loss of momentum for declared ceasefires and related events over 2020, disaggregated by region.

The Potential and Challenges of 'Humanitarian' Ceasefires for Longer-Term Peace Efforts Should Be Better Understood (and may be important to vaccination campaigns)

Humanitarian assistance can be agreed as part of broader high-level mediation efforts or mediated on an ad hoc basis by locally based actors, but the connection to any wider peace process is complicated. When peace processes stall, allowing flows of aid or humanitarian evacuations of vulnerable populations may be the only issue that parties to conflict can agree on.³³ Whilst provisions for humanitarian assistance are often agreed alongside other issues in peace agreements, conflict parties also reach stand-alone agreements that focus solely on humanitarian issues. These agreements are sometimes referred to as 'humanitarian pauses' or 'Days of Tranquillity', although some go beyond the limited scope of a ceasefire.

In the somewhat similar context of former 'health ceasefires' (e.g. for polio vaccination programmes to access populations in conflict zones), research from USIP indicates that so-called 'Days of Tranquillity' worked best when decoupled from wider political efforts to achieve a more lasting peace.³⁴ Humanitarian and health actors and institutions often try to put a firewall between what they are negotiating for humanitarian reasons and wider political dynamics;³⁵ however, some reflections claim that there are opportunities for trust-building and wider positive contributions, or 'health as a bridge for peace'.³⁶ Other research on the links between health interventions and peace suggests that there is not enough existing systematic research to understand whether humanitarian ceasefires or pauses do lead to comprehensive talks or a reduction in overall violence.³⁷ As effective vaccines against Covid-19 are developed, and vaccination campaigns are likely to become part of the agenda for conflict-affected areas, this research will become increasingly important in informing the next steps of intervention to support peace processes in a time of Covid-19.

Monitoring Conflict Parties' Conduct throughout the Ceasefire Process is Vital to Reduction in Violence

Conflict parties can perceive tangible moves towards a ceasefire as a brief window of opportunity to consolidate or achieve last minute gains (such as seeking to move a line of engagement to retain control over certain areas before fighting stops). This means that the periods immediately prior to a ceasefire can be particularly violent, and have severe effects on civilian populations, which can put pressure on health systems that are already under-resourced and dealing with the overwhelming threat of Covid-19. Additional capacity and preparation for this period might be necessary to mitigate the effects of any pre-ceasefire offensives.

Once a bilateral ceasefire is called, existing research strongly suggests that third party guarantees are vital for groups to take security risks as part of the ceasefire process.³⁸ This is particularly important for non-state actors, who are often under pressure to demobilise in ways state armies are not. For the former, demobilizing may weaken their position and expose them to complete defeat – thus making demobilization and existential issue for non-state actors. This means that monitoring becomes preferable to immediately insisting on complete demobilization. However, putting in place monitoring is difficult in the current context, and lockdowns and emergency legislation may give state forces extensive powers to enter areas, exacerbating the lack of trust of non-state actors.

In places where there has been no pre-existing, or struggling, peace process in place, the pandemic has made it more difficult for agreements to be formally reached by all sides, as indicated by a distinct lack of bilateral or multilateral agreements as noted above, which may also result in fewer opportunities for bringing in third parties that are willing and able to monitor the ceasefires. This, in turn, makes it more likely that the Covid-19-induced ceasefires will not last as long as those in more formal processes, and that they will provide fewer opportunities for dialogue between warring sides to be extended or revisited.

Ceasefire Design Often Creates Real Risks of Gender Exclusion

Gender inclusion in Covid-19 ceasefires is important. 'It can ensure that gendered dimensions of conflict are addressed; prohibit gender-based violence as part of ceasefire terms; tap into women's expertise in humanitarian action and negotiation; add to the credibility of a process; set in place the logic of inclusion for future negotiations; and promote inclusion of a gender perspective in any negotiation agenda.'³⁹ Ceasefires are already far less likely to take a gender-sensitive approach than other stages of peace agreement, and of the 25 ceasefires declared in response to Covid-19 (as of March 2021), none contain any specific references to women, girls, and gender.⁴⁰ This is despite reports of the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 will have on women and girls across contexts, and the need for gender-sensitive analysis of Covid-19 responses.⁴¹ Gender inclusion matters not just for reasons of equality and fairness, but because ceasefires often require community action led by women if they are to be effective, and because they can set pathways to a broader resolution of the conflict where women's inclusion requires to be guaranteed.

Part III: Supporting Ceasefires in a Time of Covid-19 - Issues and Recommendations

As calls from the UNSG and others to use Covid-19 as an opportunity for a global ceasefire did not result in a sustained wave of ceasefires throughout the past year, and generally did not lead to a reduction in armed violence worldwide, this leads us to a critical question: how can we support not just ceasefires, but peacemaking more generally during a pandemic?

At the time of publication, actors in several conflicts have reverted to 'business as usual', and in-person talks had even resumed in some peace processes by winter 2020/2021. In November 2020, the intra-Libyan political and military talks resumed in Tunisia, operating via a hybrid combination of virtual sessions and face-to-face meetings with social distancing and face masks.⁴² The Sant' Egidio community hosted face-to-face talks (whilst wearing masks) between the government of South Sudan and the South Sudan opposition movement (SSOMA) in Rome,⁴³ and in-person talks were held in Geneva, Paris, and Moscow during the process to reach a permanent ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with both processes taking place in October 2020.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the Covid-19 pandemic is still taking hold in many parts of the world, and not all of those involved in peace processes (particularly at Track II and in more local processes) have access to resources for international travel and mobility to attend physical talks during a pandemic. Logistical limitations of newly developed vaccines mean that Covid-19 is likely to remain an issue that peacemakers will have to grapple with for the near future.⁴⁵ Public health experts suggest that this is not the last pandemic humanity is facing. In this final section of the report, we set out options and ideas for supporting ceasefires during a pandemic, many of which could apply to peacemaking more broadly in response to widespread infectious disease.

Recommendation 1: Local Initiatives for Localised Ceasefires. Whilst the UNSG's call for ceasefires was global and attracted attention as directed to the 'large scale' conflicts and conflict actors, in some contexts there will already be pre-existing local initiatives to reach ceasefires.⁴⁶ As we explored in Part II, framing a pre-existing local ceasefire as a response to the global ceasefire might be of interest to some local armed actors to attract international recognition. Where local initiatives are already in progress, there may be opportunities to support these if they struggle to survive virus dynamics and social distancing rules, using innovative and appropriate forms of PeaceTech, and by networking local mediators to ensure peer groups of support, such as through international mediators' network who already are experienced in connecting remotely. Supporting research and consultations that seek to understand what is already underway in localised contexts is important for developing appropriate support, rather than seeking to 'scale down' mechanisms of support operating at the level of national ceasefire efforts, as the practices and dynamics of negotiation may be very different.

Furthermore, our research on local peace processes shows that localised peace agreements are often mediated by those who might not primarily identify as peace mediators: doctors, business owners, women's groups, and religious leaders all play a role in brokering peace deals.⁴⁷ Given the travel restrictions that Covid-19 places on mediators outside an immediate locale, it is even more critical now to ensure that all those involved in local peacemaking efforts are included in training and support mechanisms. Local mediators will already be well placed to understand local power dynamics that could influence negotiation efforts, and to assess who could be influential beyond the 'usual suspects' of mediation architecture and networks. This is a longer-term approach to support but could at least work to provide some sort of local momentum, particularly if engaged in with local partners.

Recommendation 2: Support Data-Collection. As we identified in Part II, during the early stages of the pandemic there was considerable confusion of whether certain ceasefires had actually been declared or not. This illustrates a clear need to monitor and seek information on whether ceasefire commitments are made in a 'loose' or 'generic' way, in order to give space to responses, or in a way that fast-tracks underlying diplomatic efforts to put in place framework agreements, without defining ceasefires in a way that is problematic to parties. PSRP did this by carefully compiling declarations of conflict parties, and related events, since March 2020, and publishing as the CV-19 Ceasefires Tracker open access tool, which tracks ceasefires and related events such as extensions and terminations, that have occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴⁸ Building a more accurate picture of the state of peace processes during the pandemic can also be aided by data from other online tools, such as trackers from International IDEA, the International Crisis Group and the International Centre for Not For Profit Law which monitor the uses and impacts of states of emergency, particularly if brought together with conflict and peace data tools.⁴⁹ These tools and many other Covid-19 trackers are now available in PSRP's new "Covid-19 Trackers Library".⁵⁰

Recommendation 3: Value and Build Diplomatic and Institutional Support for the UNSG Call or Similar Future Initiatives. Earlier in this report we argued that the UNSG call for a 90 day humanitarian ceasefire to tackle Covid-19 largely failed to gain traction, and despite best efforts, gradually fizzled out as conflict parties adapted to the 'new normal' of peacemaking during a pandemic. However, as the crisis continues, diplomatic interventions aimed at maintaining public attention and momentum of Covid-19 ceasefires can include: making sure there is an effective tracking mechanism within the UN; ensuring further support and resources for conflict prevention; and maintaining momentum across the international system, including at UN Security Council level for a coherent response across the peacebuilding architecture.

Recommendation 4: Build better Understanding of the Pathways forward to Peace from Targeted Humanitarian Ceasefires. As the pandemic progresses, despite an apparent move away from the humanitarian-style ceasefires as declared in the first half of 2020, there is still the possibility of actors declaring 'humanitarian ceasefires' or 'corridors' in order to facilitate Covid-19 responses, particularly as vaccines become more readily available. However, as identified in Part II, there remains limited comparative understanding of the potential outcomes of and conditions necessary to facilitate effective humanitarian ceasefires. In order to better understand the potential of humanitarian ceasefires to positively impact peacemaking during the pandemic, peacebuilders could support innovative ways of bringing together humanitarian professionals, health professionals, and conflict resolution specialists, to understand how humanitarian ceasefires or corridors may build other dynamics, particularly those that support information exchange and trust-building, with no explicit attempts to extend the talks.

Recommendations 5: Support Better Monitoring of Conflict Parties' Conduct throughout the Ceasefire Process. Existing practice and technological innovation suggest a number of options for monitoring ceasefire processes during the Covid-19 pandemic, even in contexts where more traditional 'in-person' third-party monitoring is not possible.

Firstly, 'Joint Committees' of state and non-state actor leaders are standard in peace processes and are often a form of 'mutual monitoring'. These can be encouraged to be formed, even given the crisis, and have regular online 'check-in' meetings, perhaps also to exchange information on Covid-19 issues. In some processes, such as the 5+5 Joint Military Committee in Libya, these committees have met through a "hybrid Covid-secure" method of both socially-distanced in-person meetings, and video conferencing.⁵¹ A pre-Covid-19 socially distanced monitoring method is the cross-party 'hotline', where joint committees, or a third-party organisation, establish a hotline for people on both sides of the conflict to call regarding violations, or points of escalation.

Secondly, in conflicts where the commonly-used form of monitoring using international third-parties (such as peacekeeping forces) is not possible, particularly where the spread of Covid-19 has been linked to international personnel,⁵² forms of localised ceasefire monitoring can bring together local expertise, relationships, and wider political legitimacy. In Kenya community activists have developed small-scale, innovative, 'reporting apps', where communities confidentially report risks of kidnapping and other forms of insecurity using text messages, and protection elements are put in place, often during a period before a violent incident where the community anticipate and 'know' that something is going to happen.⁵³ Such innovation could provide a basis for developing low-tech community reporting of ceasefire violations during Covid-19. More formalised 'local peace committees' to monitor or enforce local agreements have also proved effective in some cases, but require creative thinking in terms of minimising Covid-19 spread through intra-community travel.⁵⁴

Thirdly, peacebuilders are increasingly thinking about the role of remote technology to monitor ceasefires, of which Covid-19 has been a catalyst for such discussions. There are tried and tested tools in place for small-scale survey type 'monitoring' whereby in-country users feed answers into online surveys designed for low-bandwidth areas. Examples include SMS and WhatsApp text surveys;⁵⁵ the KoBoToolbox (can be used on and offline and encrypted); and the Medica app that documents sexual violence during conflict and in remote areas. Importantly, some of these can be used directly through online tools, without having to contract private providers in complex and expensive ways, and could be tailored to facilitate ceasefire monitoring during Covid-19.

If large-scale, nationwide ceasefires are reached, peacebuilders could learn from very high-tech air strike monitoring methods, such as the Hala Systems' early-warning project in Syria.⁵⁶ Airplane flights are tracked and monitored using sensors placed across the country, and crowdsourced information is systematised and triangulated to anticipate and protect civilian targets, using methodologies that are potentially extendable to other settings. However, using crowd-sourced information often carries complex ethical and protection issues for individuals in conflict settings, and we know of very few large-scale experiments this sort. Peacebuilders looking to this method need to take particular caution with the ethical and security implications of these systems, as there are strong potential military applications of the knowledge if data becomes insecure or misused, such as states and non-state armed actors using information from crowdsourced tools to target peacebuilders and human rights activists. Resourcing may also become more of an issue with larger scale or more advanced technical approaches.

Recommendation 6: Deal Better with Gender Inclusion in Ceasefires. As demonstrated by existing Covid-19 ceasefires, gender inclusion does not happen automatically, and there is a risk that the sense of emergency surrounding Covid-19 means that it will be used as an excuse to exclude women from ceasefire negotiation processes, and gender sensitive approaches will be de-prioritised and not undertaken. Conversely, given that women disproportionately comprise the healthcare workforce in multiple contexts, this could present opportunities for supporting women's inclusion in negotiations where they have thus far been excluded, particularly if humanitarian ceasefires are on the agenda. Going forward, any support mechanisms for ceasefires agreed during the pandemic or any emergent peace processes should be gender-proofed and ensure pro-active convening and involvement of women.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Our research on Covid-19-related ceasefires shows that reactions to the UNSG's call could be found in a wide variety of conflict-affected contexts, even the most complex and long-running ones, such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Libya. However, there are as yet few instances of ceasefires prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic that have kick-started a new round of wider negotiations. Almost a year on from the UNSG's Global Ceasefire call, we find that conflict and peace processes are increasingly returning to 'normal', as any Covid-19 concerns become part of the totality of context, rather than a new external shock. Among the ceasefires proclaimed, most have been issued by non-state actors, with only isolated examples of governments taking the lead. Most of the ceasefires declared during the Covid-19 pandemic have been unilaterally proclaimed, or only subsequently accepted by both sides. The Covid-19 related ceasefires have also been limited in temporal and geographic scope, and exclusive in terms of gender-sensitivity. Finally, we emphasise that it is important to differentiate between ceasefires that are explicitly related to the UNSG's call and to the pandemic from those that are issued on a regular basis in existing processes.

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The Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) is centrally concerned with how political settlements can be made both more stable, and more inclusive of those affected by them beyond political elites. In particular, the programme examines the relationship between stability and inclusion, sometimes understood as a relationship between peace-making and justice.

The programme is addressing three broad research questions relating to political settlements:

1. How do different types of political settlements emerge, and what are the actors, institutions, resources, and practices that shape them?
2. How can political settlements be improved by internally-driven initiatives, including the impact of gender-inclusive processes and the rule of law institutions?
3. How, and with what interventions, can external actors change political settlements?

The PSRP is a research consortium, of which University of Edinburgh is the lead organisation, with partners including: Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR), Conciliation Resources (CR), International IDEA, The Institute for Security Studies (ISS), The Rift Valley Institute (RVI), and the Transitional Justice Institute (TJI), Ulster University).

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